

September 14, 2016

## Voting from abroad

### **Q: How do I vote for the U.S. President? I live in Jamaica and I'm a U.S. Citizen.**

Over 30,000 U.S. citizens live in Jamaica. Many are eligible to vote for the next president, and we hope they will participate in the November 2016 General Election. It hasn't always been possible to cast your vote from abroad. U.S. citizens abroad got the right to vote in federal elections in 1975 with passage of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Rights Act. Under the Act, states must provide absentee ballots for eligible voters in federal elections if they are away from home. To help citizens abroad cast their absentee vote, the Federal Voting Assistance Program was created. The program can help you determine your eligibility to vote in a specific U.S. jurisdiction, and then help you register to receive an absentee ballot in the mail or electronically. To start the process, visit [www.FVAP.gov](http://www.FVAP.gov) and select your home state in the red square in the upper left.

What is absentee voting? On election day this November 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, U.S. citizens living in Jamaica will not come to the U.S. Embassy to cast their ballots. Instead, they will have cast their votes days or weeks earlier, by mail or in some cases electronically, using absentee ballots. Their votes will be added to county-level totals back in their home states. Each of the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, has its own rules and processes for absentees voters. Voting with an absentee ballot can require research and advanced planning, but in many ways it can be easier than voting in person on Election Day.

To vote for President while abroad you must meet the following criteria:

1. You must be a U.S. citizen.  
Only U.S. citizens can vote. Permanent residents (Green Card holders) and other non-citizens cannot vote in U.S. elections.
2. You must be over 18.  
Only citizens who are over 18 on Election Day can vote.
3. You must have the right to vote under federal, state and county laws.  
Some citizens cannot vote because they lost their right under laws that are unique to their home state or county. For example, in some jurisdictions felons released from jail will need to apply to have their voting rights reinstated. Check your status now if you have any concerns.
4. You must be able to claim a U.S. state or the District of Columbia (Washington, D.C.) as your most recent domicile in the United States.
5. U.S. citizens who live in a U.S. territory Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands can vote in the U.S. primary elections, but not in the November presidential elections.

6. You must be eligible for an absentee ballot under the laws of your home state. Each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia sets its own rules for absentee voting, in compliance with the 1975 Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Rights Act. Some jurisdictions allow absentee voting by U.S. citizens who have never lived in the United States. If you are a U.S. citizen, but you were not born in and have never lived in the United States, your eligibility to vote depends on where your parents last lived in the United States. Check here for state-by-state rules: [www.fvap.gov/citizen-voter/reside](http://www.fvap.gov/citizen-voter/reside)

In short, if you are a citizen over 18, your eligibility to cast an absentee ballot requires learning the specific rules of your home state and communicating with your local elections office so you can register and request a ballot. There are over 3,000 counties in the United States. If you have any question about which county you should register in, the step-by-step tutorial at [www.FVAP.gov](http://www.FVAP.gov) is an excellent tool to help you make contact with your local elections office.

Once you know the state where you should register, and the address of your county election office, you can request an absentee ballot. You can directly request one from your home state. Alternately, you can use [www.FVAP.gov](http://www.FVAP.gov) to print a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) which will simultaneously register you to vote and request an absentee ballot for the upcoming election. After filling out the card, mail it to your local elections office in the U.S. Some states allow you to send the application electronically.

You should receive your absentee ballot no later than October 8<sup>th</sup>. You should return your ballot no later than October 15<sup>th</sup> 2016 so that it will arrive by Election Day on November 8<sup>th</sup>. The U.S. Embassy can assist with the mailing of voted ballots, but cannot guarantee they will arrive in time to be counted. We strongly recommend checking your state requirements early, and using electronic options when possible.

Votes cast by U.S. citizens abroad are valuable to our democratic process. By some estimates, as many as nine million U.S. citizens live and work outside the United States. If they were their own state, they would count as one of the top 15 most populous states. The Federal Voting Assistance Program is here to help you vote even when you are not in the United States. Please visit: [www.FVAP.gov](http://www.FVAP.gov) to learn more about absentee voting.

*You can find more information about how to travel to the US on the embassy's website at [kingston.usembassy.gov](http://kingston.usembassy.gov) and the website of our authorized service provider at [usvisa-info.com](http://usvisa-info.com). Keep on top of embassy news on our Facebook page, [facebook.com/pages/USEmbassy-Jamaica](https://facebook.com/pages/USEmbassy-Jamaica), and by following @USEmbassyJA on Twitter. We also answer general visa questions on our Facebook and Twitter pages.*

*You may also send your questions to: [editorial@jamaicaobserver.com](mailto:editorial@jamaicaobserver.com) to be forwarded to the embassy.*

**Reminder: Your appointment time is your arrival time, NOT your interview time. Do not show up earlier than your appointment time.**